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## **Crossing Boundaries in Higher Education: Linking Theory to Practice with two UK Case Studies**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to consider the configurations, strategies and implications of facilitating teaching and learning through bringing together and crossing boundaries between education and work, and theory and practice (Akkerman, 2011), specifically focusing on the context of practically-based higher education (HE). In this paper we argue that boundary crossing is a continuous feature of practically-based HE – the process which, as we will further argue, is constructed and co-constructed through collaboration between different actors: tutors, learners and employers. Drawing on data from two HE case studies, the paper endeavours to demonstrate how institutional cooperation and collaboration between various actors create instances of crossing boundaries that enhance the teaching and learning process. The case studies include the National Software Academy (NSA) at Cardiff University, which delivers a BSc in Applied Software Engineering. Parallel approaches are drawn with our second case study the Edge Hotel School (EHS) at the University of Essex, a practically-based HE offering, enabling university students to obtain foundation or honours degrees in hospitality and events management. These case studies provide examples of innovative approaches and models in HE, aiming to facilitate action-based learning and offering a distinct form of continuous, hands-on exposure to real-life workplace practices.

### **Keywords**

practically-based higher education, employer engagement, workplace learning

### **1 Introduction**

Debate has shifted in recent years to the role of universities in preparing its students for the workplace, amongst all courses, not just vocationally focused ones (e.g. Cranmer, 2006; Prokou, 2008). This paper draws on two higher education (HE) case studies which apply a number of teaching and learning approaches to ensure theory and practice are continually interlinked. Our first case, the National Software Academy (NSA) at Cardiff University delivers a BSc in Applied Software Engineering. Although a HE course, its approach shows similarities with vocational provisions and delivers its course ensuring that students are highly employable as



software engineers as soon as they graduate. A key element running through much of NSA's day-to-day course delivery is the linking of theory and practice and the continuous interchange between lecturers, employers and other external stakeholders, and students.

Our second case study, the Edge Hotel School (EHS) provides a unique model of integrated practically-based HE, enabling university students to obtain foundation or honours degrees in hospitality and events management while working alongside industry professionals in an on-site 4-star country house commercial hotel. EHS focuses on preparing young people for work. EHS is a university department, situated at the edge of the University of Essex campus, owned and managed through the university as a subsidiary company. It is unique in its set up and operation in the UK.

Drawing on these case studies, the paper will address the following research question: What approaches and strategies do various stakeholders develop to enhance practically-based HE and create opportunities for crossing boundaries between theory and practice/education and work? Constructing opportunities for crossing boundaries within and between the context of education, work and other related settings is relevant to a range of dimensions such as consolidation of practice–theory, employer engagement and wider industry needs and requirements.

Both research examples, the National Software Academy and the Edge Hotel School took a case study approach to explore and describe the nature of the provisions. Data were generated using semi-structured interviews and observations. In both cases we developed themes and sub-themes using content analysis.

## **2 Boundary crossing**

The distinctive feature of the notion of practically-based HE underpins the importance of crossing boundaries between the spaces of education and work. In the literature, the concept of 'boundary crossing' has been used to advance knowledge and understanding of work-related learning, and the ways that learners acquire and use their knowledge and skills across different contexts and settings (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003; Akkerman, 2011; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

In considering the concept of boundary crossing, our starting point is the idea that all boundaries, for example, between education and work, one occupational specialism and another etc., constitute both a potential learning resource and an opportunity to offer some form of contextualizing that learning. This brings attention to the interpretation of boundaries as spaces with potential for learning (Harris & Ramos, 2012; Edwards, 2011) where the interplay between learning and working spaces is characterised by their somewhat blurred boundaries, and where boundaries and spaces are multifaceted and multidimensional (Kersh, 2015).

Practically-based HE happens through continuous boundary crossing between diverse spaces, settings, individual teaching and learning approaches, and a range of other elements. The central point of the argument presented here is that what makes practically-based HE distinctive, is that it involves HE institutions, their staff and their learners in a process of continuous boundary crossing between sites of learning, relationships between education and work, practice and theory. Boundary crossing is regarded here as a major contributor to the development of practically-based HE. Considering boundary crossing as a continuous feature of practically-based HE to enhance the quality of academic teaching learning and teaching, this process is constructed and co-constructed through collaboration between university lecturers, practitioners, learners and employers.

### 3 Findings

#### 3.1 National Software Academy

The methods of teaching employed at NSA are not regarded as traditional in HE settings, which are typically theory-heavy and largely lecture-based. At NSA two- and-a-half-hour teaching blocks are set up based on a continuous cycle of theory and practice. Often a flipped-classroom approach is taken whereby, students read or watch content before the class sessions take place or are introduced to short 10-minute lectures of content when in the classroom before moving on to applying it in practice. The majority of the sessions involve students individually or in teams putting into practice the theoretical knowledge they have learnt in a workplace-like environment, with the support of teaching staff, peers and, at times, tutors from industry. The complexities of the theory are gradually covered throughout the sessions and interweaved with practical elements. This ensures that knowledge becomes concrete. This approach to teaching and learning supports students to be able to apply their knowledge in different environments.

The close link between theory and practice at NSA is reinforced by input from employers into the curriculum from the outset and throughout the programme. From the initiation of NSA in 2015, employers were regarded as partners, along with course leaders, in designing the curriculum. Strong ongoing relationships between a range of employers and staff at NSA ensures that the curriculum content is continuously reviewed and kept up to date with current developments in practices and technology that take place within the workplace. For instance, the technology and language that is commonly used in business: "They don't just talk about steering groups and getting industry involved. Lots of universities will want industry participation in their programmes... They create steering groups but they maintain those steering groups." (Employer B)

Client-facing projects also give students opportunities to strengthen the links between the theory they have learnt and putting this into practice through authentic project under the guidance of employers (clients). All students carry out these 4-6 week projects each semester, in small student teams. Projects are defined by the client on the basis of current relevance or priority to them. The client may be an employer from a software engineering firm, or more widely, from any sector, public or private. The brief for the project is proposed by the client, is often based on a real business problem but scrutinised by the teaching staff, to ensure the project is fully coherent with the course learning objectives and relevant to the students at that stage of the programme. This ensures the connection between the theory and practice is maintained and relevant, since the projects are authentic and meaningful: "You may try implementation in a pseudo environment, but it's never really ... you never get that full experience" (Employer A).

The research found that the use of these projects has several measurable benefits to students. For example, developing communication skills from exposure to terminology used by businesses, and acquiring the ability and confidence to ask the right questions in order to understand the client's requirements. Students importantly gained the ability to communicate and present their products to both technical and non-technical stakeholders. Likewise, students develop problem solving skills, through developing and refining the skill in different learning environments, and ultimately demonstrating this during a placement or when in employment.

This link between theory and practice also prevails in the teaching of employability skills, such as team working, delivering an effective presentation, and project management. Some employability skills are taught explicitly, initially by introducing the theoretical nature of a particular skill by an expert. Students are given opportunities to apply skills firstly in a 'safe environment' at NSA, for instance by playing different team roles with a group of students. They then refine their employability skills during client-facing projects and work placements, which could be considered a 'live environment'.

### 3.2 Edge Hotel School

The Edge Hotel School (EHS) was set up in 2011 and opened to students in 2012, as a joint undertaking by the University of Essex and the Edge Foundation. The EHS set-up remains unique to this day as a model of continuous and integrated practically-based HE provision in the hospitality field.

EHS has an integrated model of action-based learning offering a distinct form of continuous, hands-on exposure to real-life workplace practices in a fully commercial hotel. This model requires involvement, and joint efforts of some key stakeholder such as university lecturers, employers, and learners. Enhancing practically-based HE is strongly underpinned by approaches such as consolidation of practice–theory, employer engagement and taking into account wider industry needs and requirements. The relationship between the EHS and the hotel has been described as highly interdependent and requiring careful balancing of priorities and needs. Both the importance of commercial success and creating a meaningful learning environment for students have been taken into account, as the key stakeholders develop their approaches and strategies to enhance practically-based HE that create opportunities for crossing boundaries between theory and practice/education and work.

#### *Focus on industry-engaged education*

The EHS model is built on an ethos of industry engagement which runs through the whole of the programme and is cultivated through various activities such as guest lectures, conferences and events, career fairs and scholarships as well as involvement in teaching and learning activities: "[...] industry tends to kind of flock around this place. We get a lot of interest, and people want to work with us." [Academic staff member, EHS]

The long-term commitment to industry relationships is also reflected in the academic and professional identities of teaching staff, all of whom have experience in and ongoing links with the industry. The relationships with industry also serve to instil a sense of purpose to the hard work involved in academic study, allowing students access to multiple networks and opportunities and helping them to envisage future career paths. Close working relationships with the industry have been demonstrated through collaborative projects and initiatives, which provide students with a range of opportunities to apply their skills to real-life commercial projects.

#### *Practical learning opportunities*

Students recognise and appreciate opportunities to relate their theoretical knowledge (gained in the classroom) to the real-life context of the hotel in a meaningful way. This supports their capacity for making connections between theory and practice. The direct contact with customers as well as exposure to their feedback (both positive and negative) is an important feature of the learning context. The experience of the full range of hotel departments was considered to offer valuable insights, as well as promoting their future credibility as managers in the hospitality industry. While providing a real-life context, the hotel also functions as a somewhat protected learning space, allowing room for improving practice and learning through mistakes. This is in some contrast to work experience placements in industry which students perceive as networking opportunities, requiring them to perform at higher skill levels to make a positive impression.

#### *Communication and dialogue*

Both academic and hotel staff have underlined the importance of continuous communication, dialogue and coordination between the EHS and the hotel, and this is considered to be another important strategy for creating instances of crossing boundaries that enhancing the teaching and learning process. In addition, there is the highly personalised levels of support for student

learning in both academic and work-based contexts. They value the fact that academic and support services staff at the school know everyone by name, are approachable and accessible, with a general ‘open door’ policy allowing opportunities for students to discuss current issues and reflect on their experiences.

#### 4 Conclusions

This paper has endeavoured to consider the implications and perceptions of learning through boundary crossing and knowledge transfer in the context of practically-based HE, particularly drawing on two relevant examples: EHS and NSA. Our findings suggest that approaches and strategies that stakeholders develop in order to enhance practically-based HE strongly relate to creating opportunities for crossing boundaries between theory and practice/education and work. Both models support educational processes of boundary crossing, which allow students to apply skills, reflect on practice and integrate academic and work-based and practical learning on an ongoing basis, and in various environments. This process is relevant to a range of dimensions such as consolidation of practice–theory, employer engagement and wider industry needs and requirements. Co-constructing opportunities for boundary crossing is a continuous feature of practically-based HE, which involves combined efforts of HE institutions, employers and learners. This contributes to the learners’ perceptions of theory and practice as interrelated categories, rather than separate types of knowledge. Contextualising theory in practice and vice versa and making links between education and work visible can take place at different levels: institutional level/learners’ immediate settings (university studies), meso level/learners’ parallel settings (e.g. cooperation with employers, work experience) and a wider level that involves enhancing graduate employability and life chances.

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